South Algerian EFL Learners' Errors

Bachir Bouhania, University of Adrar, Algeria

Abstract
In higher education, particularly in departments of English, EFL students write essays, and research papers in the target language. Arab learners of English, however, face several difficulties at the morphological, phonetic and phonological, stylistic and syntactic levels. This paper reports on the findings of a corpus study, which analyses the wrong use of the English verb *to exist* as **to be exist* as **is exists, *are existed, *does not exist,* and **existness*. The corpus consists of more than two thousand exam copies of mid-term, make-up and remedial exams for the academic years ranging between 2003 and 2013.The exams papers concern the fields of Discourse Typology, Linguistics and Sociolinguistics, Phonetics and Phonology. The analysis of the results obtained from the data shows that, although the wrong verb is not used by the majority of students, it is nevertheless significantly found in a number of exam sheets (s=78).

Keywords: Error Analysis, Algerian learners, EFL, errors, Intralingual interference, interlanguage, Interlingual interference, linguistic transfer.

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Introduction

At university level, EFL students submit essays, research papers and final projects in English to show accuracy and performance in the target language. They need to master the language and the genres that characterise the various subjects such as civilisation, literature and linguistics. Yet, writing and speaking in English is a complex process for foreign language learners who, unavoidably, make a lot of errors. As part of the learning process (Hyland 2003, Ferris 2002), errors are regular and consistent (Reid, 1993) even if students learn the rules of English grammar (Lalande 1982)

Arab EFL learners, on the other side, find difficulties at the phonetic/phonological, morphological and syntactic levels. Several causes are at the origin of this fact, among which the curricula, the learners' motivations, the instrumentality of the language, and finally the lack of suitable language environment for practicing the language.

The actual research falls within the scope of Error Analysis (EA); it reports a pedagogical shortcoming whereby the English verb 'to exist' is used as *to be exist with various grammatical structures. The corpus of study consists of more than two thousand five hundred exam papers of both new and classical systems. The surveyed exams start from the academic year 2003 to 2013 in the fields of Discourse, Linguistics, Phonetics and Phonology.

Results and analyses show that the wrong form is significantly found in a number of exam sheets. Not only is the verb to exist misused, but others too such as to depend as *is depended and to belong as *is belonged, to happen as *is happened. In the next lines, a review of the literature on error analysis and its concepts is introduced.

1. Error Analysis

Conversely to Contrastive Analysis that compares between L1 and L2 and tries to predict errors, Error Analysis (EA) highlights actual classroom errors, which enable the teachers to assess the learners' progress. EA manages to find appropriate language learning strategies that promote the acquisition of foreign languages the way mother-tongues are acquired.

EA's principal standpoint is that learners inevitably make errors. As such, both its theoretical and practical branches aim at discovering the mental processes that trigger the learners' tactics to acquire language such as analogy, overgeneralization, and simplification. EA tries also to find out similarities and differences between language learning and language acquisition procedures so as to set exhaustive theories about their development and progress (Keshavarz 1997; Erdogan 2005).

EA seeks to measure the language performance of learners through the various errors they commit. It has become an important part of EFL teaching and learning, since it examines actual language performance of learners as part of contrastive analysis (Heydari and Bagheri, 2012 cited in Kaweera 2013:10). As far as the methodology of EA is concerned, one can classify it in the following order:
-Collecting and Identifying errors

-Classifying errors into types
-reporting frequency of errors
-Identifying areas of difficulty in L2
-Determining sources and seriousness of errors
-Finding remedies by the instructor in the classroom

At this level of description, defining 'error' and 'mistake' is essential.

1.1 Defining Error

An *error* has several definitions, among these is that it is part of the system of interlanguage rules and is not considered wrong by the learners (Corder, 1967). It is an unwanted linguistic form (George, 1972), or a rejected and unexpected one (Fanselow, 1977). According to Ellis (1994 and 1997)[1], an error is a gap in the learner's knowledge because he does not know if it is correct or not. Gass and Selinker (1994) assert that an error is frequent and is not corrected by the learner but by the teacher. An error, then, is "...a linguistic form which deviates from the correct form...This is called the 'native speaker norm'" (Allwright and Bailey, 2004:84).

However, the native speaker norm may not be available in countries where non-native English teachers prevail. This is the case in Algeria where the majority of EFL teachers are local natives. In other words, the learners' deviation from the native speaker norm is also a consequence of the non-native teacher who may not master the language, its grammar and phonology.

The notion *error* fluctuates according to changes in pedagogy and, most particularly, changes in teachers' attitudes towards and treatment of errors and mistakes. After Hymes' (1971) concept of Communicative Competence, communicative approaches to language teaching give more importance to communicative effectiveness than to formal accuracy. The concern, then, is with the learners' ability to clearly communicate ideas than to grammatically produce correct sentences (Canale and Swain, 1980).

1.2 Error or mistake

Corder (1967) considers errors as "regular patterns in the learners' speech which consistently differ from the target language model. These patterns reveal the learner's underlying competence, i.e. the system of rules that govern his speech" (in Allwright and Bailey, 2004:91). For Chaudron (1986:66), errors are 1) linguistic forms or content that differed from native speech norms or facts, and 2) any other behavior signaled by the teacher as needing improvement. The learners do not perceive errors as wrong forms, since they are part of their system of interlanguage rules.
A *mistake*, in contrast, is due to the learner's occasional lapse; it happens when the learner does not know how to put his knowledge into practice. In general, second language learners correct their mistakes, but not their errors.

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[1] For Ellis (1997: 51) a 'transfer' is 'the influence that the learner's L1 exerts over the acquisition of an L2'.

Ellis (1997) stresses that there are two possible ways to verify whether a form is a mistake or an error. The first is through consistency of performance, i.e. frequency of repetition on the part of the learner. If this last uses the wrong form a few times, it is a mistake. If he persists to use it and does not consider it incorrect, it is an error. The other way is to ask the learner to correct the deviant word. If he succeeds, it is a mistake; but if he fails, it is therefore an error.

Generally, a mistake is a fault due to inattention, fatigue, or carelessness on the part of the learner. Whereas, the error is perceived by native speakers as the proof of incomplete learning of the target language. Moreover, the mistake can be self-corrected, while the error is not (Richards et al., 1992). In foreign language learning, making a mistake/error shows the learner's trial to reproduce or reconstruct the target language forms.

1.3 Error or Fossilisation

Fossilisation is a unique phenomenon in second language learning (Ellis, 1997). It is often used to refer to the learners' persistence in using wrong forms. Brown (1987) states that: "the internalization of incorrect forms takes place by means of the same learning process as the internalization of correct forms, but we refer to the latter…as "learning"" (1987:186) while the former is called fossilisation. In a few words, fossilisation is the regular and constant use of 'erroneous' forms by second language learners.

Various hypotheses are proposed to account for the question 'why do second language learners make errors? Among the most important are: negative interference of mother tongue, intralingual and interlingual errors. These are developed in the next lines.

1.4 Written Errors

Hyland (2003) points out to the difficulties that L2 learners stumble upon in writing English. In particular, he stresses on the "burden of acquiring English and learning to write simultaneously" (in Kaweera, 2013:9). Both Ferris (2002) and Hyland (2003) agree that EFL written compositions are short, lack cohesion and fluency, and are full of errors. Lalande (1982:140) states that: "some students exhibit remarkable consistency: they commit the same type of errors from one essay to the next". In other words, written errors are a source of frustration for both instructors and learners because of their undesirable consistency.

1.5 Types of Error

Stenson (1983) explains that an error can be 'induced', i.e.: it is "…resulting from the classroom situation; teacher explanation and practice" (cited in Karra, 2006). As for James (1998:1991), induced errors are material-induced errors, teacher-talk induced errors, and exercise-based induced errors. All of which belong to the category of classroom-based errors.

Moreover, Corder (1973) asserts that the learner may face several kinds of errors. These are:
1-omission of some element,

2-addition of some unnecessary or incorrect element,
3-selection of an incorrect element, and
4-misordering of the element

There are several causes to the latter kinds of error, the system of interlanguage and the linguistic transfer.

2. Sources of Interference

The most probable sources of influence on the learning of foreign languages are the 'Interlanguage' and the linguistic transfer. Interlanguage was first coined by Selinker (1972) to refer to the fluctuating stages that any second language learner goes through. It is, in other words, the learners' linguistic development between the source language (SL) and the target language (TL). It is characterised by various types of errors made by the learners who do not consider errors as *errors*, and do not consider them as wrong. The system of interlanguage rules accounts for this fact.

Other researchers refer the sources of error to the negative interference of the mother-tongue on L2 acquisition. They label it as 'First language interference' (Reid 1993), or as 'Interference error' (Richards, 1971). On the other hand, two types of language transfer are acknowledged as sources of errors; interlingual and intralingual interference.

2.1 Intra- and Interlingual Interference

Intralingual transfer is a universal characteristic of the learners' attempts to simplify the learning process (Ellis, 1997). As an instance, most learners use the suffix of regular past forms, {-ed}, with all verbs. They simplify and overgeneralise the pattern. Intralingual interference can de defined as the incorrect generalisation of the rules within TL, such as false analogy, misanalysis, incomplete rule application, redundancy exploitation, overlooking cooccurrence, hypercorrection and overgeneralization.

Interlingual transfer, on the other side, is the influence that the learners' first language phonological, syntactic and lexica-semantic levels exert on foreign language learning. Interlingual interference, also referred to as developmental error occurs when students hypothesise about TL based on their limited knowledge. In opposition to the behaviouristic approach to language acquisition, interlingual errors are not old habits that the learners cannot get rid of; rather, they are the evidence that the learner is 'learning' the new language patterns.

The interference of L1 on the learning of L2 is apparent when the two languages are structurally different, for instance Arabic and English. The learners show a high frequency of errors both in speaking and writing to the point that some researchers (Bhela, 1999) ask the question: "what kinds of language do second language learners produce in speaking and writing? Interference is defined as 'errors in the learner's use of the foreign language that can be traced back to the mother tongue' (Lott, 1983:256). Consequently, errors are found both in spoken and written forms.

The present research illustrates that the learners' misuse of the verb to exist is at the level of Corder's (1973) second type of error, i.e.: addition of some unnecessary or incorrect element. The added elements are the auxiliaries to be and to do, the bound morphemes {-s} and {-ed} for present and past tense, respectively. The other syntactic elements are the modals must and should, as well as the adverbs already, also, never, and still. The misused verb is found in the affirmative, interrogative, and negative forms.

On the other hand, it is the researcher's contention that the misused form is teacher-induced and that it is not the result of L1 negative interference on the learning of L2. Rather, the wrong verb *to be exist illustrates the complexity of L2 learning process in a context where both teachers and learners are non native speakers, and where practice inside and outside the classroom is questionable.

3. Theoretical Background

Writing academic papers is time-consuming and necessitates students' personal involvement, attentiveness, knowledge, and savoir-faire. To achieve that aim, the students need a lot of training, particularly in grammar, written expression and semantics.

Kambal (1980) asserts that Sudanese students of English have troubles with verb formation and tense. In 1983, Mukattash's study of Jordanian EFL students of English concluded that the learners have difficulties in pronunciation, spelling, morphology and syntax. More than that, the students do not communicate in the target language neither about 'academic topics' nor about 'common everyday topics' (Mukattash, 1983:169). Lack of the necessary knowledge makes them unable to talk fluently in English.

Zughoul and Taminian (1984), report that Jordanian learners of English have tremendous problems at the lexical level. Abbad (1988) describes the low level of Yemeni learners who are admitted to the department of English. He refers this problem to the inappropriate methods of teaching and the social environment which does not help in the English teaching/learning process. For instance, English is not found outside schools and universities. It is restricted to classroom activities and the reading of few books (Bhela 1999:22).

According to Rabab'ah (2003), the main problem of EFL learning /teaching is due to the teachers who are non-native English speakers. Most EFL teachers in the Arab world are Arabic native speakers.[2] Hisham's (2008) research on Arab students of business at University Utara Malaysia, reports that they face difficulties with the vocabulary register, grammar and referencing. Tahaineh (2010) conclusion about Jordanian EFL learners faulty use of English prepositions is that "MT [mother-tongue] is the major source of EFL learners' errors (58%=1323). However, transfer strategies of the TL [target language] itself are also detected and constituted a major part of the errors too (42%=967)".

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[2] This point is well commented on by Widdowson (1994) who says: "the native speaker teachers are generally equipped with knowledge only in a privileged intuitive sense, and with pedagogic competence only to a rudimentary degree… the nonnative speaker teachers know the "subject", English, in an explicit rather than intuitive sense, by virtue of having themselves learnt it as a foreign language."

In Algeria, several academic papers dealt with the learning of English at the graduate and undergraduate levels. Among these are Benrabah (1999, and 2002), Lakehal-Ayat Bermati (2008), Cherouana (2010), and Rezig (2011). The difficulties reported concern English sounds and phonemes, syntactic constructions and meanings.

Benrabah (2002) describes Arabisation in Algeria and the gradual introduction of English as part of the new reform (in Lakehal-Ayat Bermati, 2008:139). For Benrabah, the introduction of English in the sixth grade of primary school is a political decision; he says: "Et, à partir de 1996, le ministre de l'Education de l'époque décide de favoriser l'anglais au dépens du français." (p:76)[3]

As for Rezig (2011), the difficulties are not only linguistic, but also human. She asserts that the implementation of Arabisation entailed the teaching of Arabic at the expense of English and French, and that the teachers "were not formed to cope with such alterations [reforms] as it is the case of university teachers with the application of the LMD system" (p:1328).She also stresses the fact that, although they are taught English since the age of 13, many young university students are ill-oriented towards the study of English at a higher level. Many have chosen other domains and specialties, but did not receive a favorable answer from the orientation services of higher education after succeeding in the baccalaureate exam.

Moreover, Rezig (2011) points to the problem faced by the students who have negative attitudes towards the culture of the target language. She says: "The students' reaction to the English culture is one of the elements that affects much their motivation since some students who develop a negative attitude to the foreign language culture have learning differences because of the striking cultural differences between the Algerian and the English societies." (p: 1330)[4]

Learners' attitude towards the target language impacts on their success or failure in learning the foreign language. In 1969, Spolsky noted that the environment around the learner is a factor influencing and "controlling the learner's motivation to acquire the language" (p: 237). He also adds that the main actors in that situation are the learner, the teacher, the learner's peers and parents, and the speakers of the language.
Spolsky (1989) asserts that the social context has a direct influence on the learning of a second language. He says that the social context: "…plays a major role in developing in the learner the set of attitudes towards the language being learned, its speakers, and the language learning situation that…are hypothesized to influence motivation directly." (p: 131)

Cherouana (2010) affirms that, for Algerian learners of English, the main hindrance is at the level of speech intelligibility, recognition, and production. Both pupils and students have difficulties to reproduce the English *accent*; they pronounce it approximately. Most of the time, they rely on their own L1 phonology to realise the

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[3] And, starting from 1996, the minister of education at that time decides to promote English at the expense of French."
[4] According to Gardner and Lambert (1959) there are two types of motivations, Integrative and Instrumental. Integrative motivation characterizes the foreign language learner who shows a real interest in the culture of the target language, and who would like to be part of it. The instrumental, on the other hand, is a feature of those who learn foreign languages for utilitarian aims, such as getting a job, communicating with foreigners or chatting, etc.

foreign sounds, particularly the interdentals, the short vowels, the diphthongs and triphthongs.

At higher education level, Lakehal-Ayat Bermati sees that the most important drawback related to the teaching of foreign languages is the "Haste to recruit teachers who did not have yet the right qualifications." (2008:126). Rezig (2011) confirms her conclusions, and adds that the level of the teachers of English is decreasing more than it is improving. In general, the various studies of Arab learners of English report the same hindrances; these can be summed up as follows:
-impact of the mother-tongue (phonology and syntax) on the learning process,
-inconsistent curricula and teaching methodologies,
-instrumentality of the foreign language (job seeking, chatting, tourism, etc.)
-lack of the target language's environment (summer linguistic village, language immersion),
-lack of motivation for both pupils and students, and
-low quality of teaching at intermediate, secondary and university levels
-low level of competence of pupils and undergraduate students,

The above-cited causes are serious issues in the field of applied linguistics, particularly in non-native English speaking countries. Comparing the phonetic/phonological and syntactic patterns of the mother-tongue to those of the target language would permit to explain the errors made by the learners.[5]

4. Research Methodology

For more than ten years, present researcher noticed the recurrence of the verb to exist as *is exist-is existed, was existed* in exam papers at the department of English of the university of Adrar, southern Algeria. At first, it seemed to be individual mistakes, but after a closer examination, it happened to be a frequent error committed by several students from different graduation levels. In light of this observed phenomenon, the research questions that arise and that the present study seeks to answer are:
-are these occurrences errors or mistakes?
-what types of errors do we have?
-what is their frequency of occurrence?
- Is there any geographical distribution of this error at the level of formal schools?

The research survey consists of 2525 exam sheets in the fields of discourse, linguistics, sociolinguistics, and phonology starting from the academic years 2003 to 2013. Exam papers of 2004, 2005, 2006 and 2007 are not surveyed, since they are missing at the university archives. It is also worth noting that the module of discourse typology is taught in the first semester of 1st year LMD (new system) starting from 2011 onward.

The subject matters chosen are the researcher's main pedagogical units of teaching. As such, having access to papers already corrected, and on which the wrong forms are already notated is time saving.
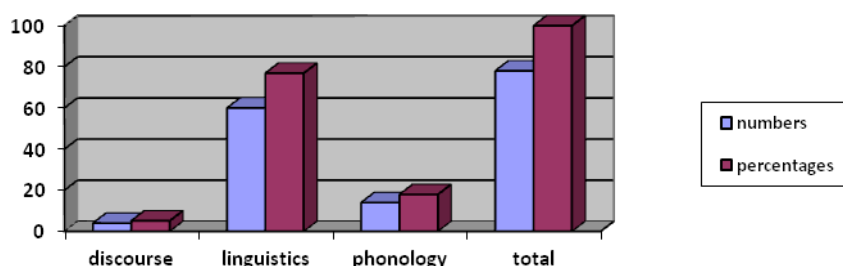
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[5] Vecide Erdoğan, *Mersin University Journal of the Faculty of Education*, Vol. 1, Issue 2, December 2005, pp. 261-270. He says that: *"Error analysis enables teachers to find out the sources of errors and take pedagogical precautions towards them. Thus, the analysis of learner language has become an essential need to overcome some questions and propose solutions regarding different aspects."* (p. 263)

4.1 The Results

Various results are obtained:
1. Out of 2525 exam sheets , only 67 papers (=2.65%) contain the wrong verb form
2. The number of token is 78
3. 47 students have used the wrong form in their exam papers
4. 5 students repeated the error more than once and throughout the years
5. Students who misuse the verb are both males (n=09) and females (n=58)
6. The misused word is found in the exams of linguistics (n=60, or 76.92%) phonology (n=14, or 17.94%), and discourse typology (n=4, or 5.12%)(cf. Graph n°1)
7. The academic years 2009 and 2010 record the highest use of the wrong form.
8. Students who misuse the verb to exist belong to the four classical and the 1st year LMD academic levels
9. Students who make use of the wrong verb come from all areas of Adrar district.
10 . Some students who make use of the wrong verb come from other administrative and geographical districts.

Graph n°1: number and percentage of tokens by fields

4.2 Grammatical Forms of the Wrong Verb

The next lines illustrate the grammatical structures used with the wrong verb and their frequency in the exam papers:

The grammatical forms	examples	Frequency
aux. + vs sing	Is exist(e)	17
aux. + ved sing	Is existed	09
aux + neg. part. + vs sing.	Is not exist(e)	07
aux. + vs sing	Is exists	06
aux. + ved plur.	Are existed	05
aux + neg. part. + vs sing.	Is no exist	04
aux. + ved plur	Was existed	02
aux + adv + vs sing.	Is already exist(s)	02
aux + neg.part. + Vs plur.	Are not exist	02
aux. + neg.part + Ved plur	Were not existed	01
aux. + neg.part + Ved sing	Was not existed	01
aux. + neg.part + Ved plur	Was not exist	01
Aux. + part+ Ved	Should be existed	01
neg.part + Vs	Not exists	01
neg.part + adv. + Ved	Not already existed	01

modal+ Vs	Must be exist	01
modal + Ved	May be existed	01
aux + adv + Vs sing.	Is still exists	01
aux + adv.neg + Vs sing.	Is never exist	01
aux + adv + Vs sing.	Is also exists	01
Aux. + neg.part+ Ved	Doesn't existed	01
aux + neg. part. + Vs sing.	Doesn't exist(e)	01
aux + adv. neg + Vs sing.	Does never exist	01
aux. + Vs sing.	Does (it) exists	01
Conj. + aux.ing+ neg. +Ved	As being non existed	01
aux + neg. part. + Ved plur.	Are not existed	01
aux + neg. part. + Vs plur.	Are not exist	01
aux. + Ving plur.	Are existing	01
Aux. +Ved plur	Are existed	01
miscellaneous	existness	01
	Total	*78*

As the table shows, there are two types of wrong uses; those which occur once (n=24 or 30.76%), and those which have more than one occurrence (n=54 or 69.23%). Those belonging to the first set can be labelled mistakes; whereas, those that are frequently repeated exemplify errors.

4.4 Geographical Distribution of the Wrong Form

An important finding is that the students who misuse the verb to exist come from different geographical backgrounds. This leads to the conclusion that the misused verb is widely spread throughout the area. The following table illustrates the spatial distribution of the token according to students' place of birth and education:

Locations	Students using the wrong form
Adrar	21
Aougrout	01
Aoulef	01
Bouali	01
Bouda	01
Fenoughil	01
Inzegmir	02
Oufrane	01
Reggane	02
Sali	02
Timimoun	06
Zaglou	02
Zaouiet-kounta	06
Total	47

The same form is found in the written papers of some students, who were born in other districts. For instance:

Districts	Students using the wrong form
Bechar	01
Ghardaia	01
Meniaa	01
Tlemcen	01
Total	04

The results of the latter table point to other questions: did students from the other districts learn the wrong form in Adrar? Or did they bring it with them from other schools? To answer these questions, an exhaustive and quantitative field-research is necessary. It needs to involve researchers and informants from different regions and districts, not only in the south but also in the north of the country.

4.3 Examples of Individual Errors

As far as EA is concerned, five (i.e.: 10.63%) students repeat the same error more than once. They do not seem to consider it as wrong, for they misuse the verb sometimes twice in the same exam paper. They also do not *consciously* correct it, since they repeat the errors in the same year and in different exam sessions. Their wrong use of the verb to exist is significant, for it represents 31.91% of the whole data.

Other students use the wrong form throughout various years and exams. The next table reports the evolution of the use of the wrong verb by some students, represented as ST1, ST2, etc.:

	1st exam	2nd exam	Make-up exam	Remedial exam	years	Total of occurrences and years
ST1			Phon3		2008-2009	05
				Ling3 (x 02)	2009-2010	4 years
			Ling3		2010-2011	
				Ling4	2012-2013	
ST2		Ling3			2007-2008	03
	Ling3				2008-2009	2 years
		Ling3			2008-2009	
ST3		Phon3			2011-2012	02
	Ling4				2012-2013	2 years
ST4		Phon3			2011-2012	02
				Ling4	2012-2013	2 years
ST5		Ling3			2008-2009	02
	Ling4				2009-2010	2 years
Total	03	04	02	04	6 years	

Conclusion

This study shows that the verb to exist, misused as *to be exist* is frequently found in the exam papers. It is significantly present in students' written compositions (s=78). This wrong form could be considered as a mistake, but in regard to its repetition, it is an error. In some instances, the wrong form is repeated more than once in the same paper, or throughout the years.

The fact that the students who make this error and mistake come from the various areas of Adrar and other districts is puzzling on itself. It shows that this ill-written item is more widespread than it seems. It also shows that the students brought it from either secondary or intermediate schools. In other words, the present research is just a tentative answer to a phenomenon which is deeply rooted in the educational system. It also means that the research needs not to stop at this stage, but has to go further by taking into consideration not only the learners but also the teachers of the three educational levels, the intermediate, the secondary, and the higher.

As far as language transfer from L1 to L2 is concerned, one can say that there is no clear-cut evidence that this is the case for the learners. The interlingual transfer from the mother-tongue to the target language is not probable, for the construction *to be exist* does not exist in 'Arabic'. Intralingual transfer is more probable than the interlingual. As evidence for this assertion are the frequent ill-uses like *are belong, *are disappear, and *is differed, *is differ, *are differing with the meaning is different from, or *is dependent on, *is depended on for it depends on, *is finded for is found, *is happened instead of has happened, or else *can identified, *should be know, *can used it, *can defines, *do/did not born, *can says/said that, *could not appeared, etc.

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Contact email: bouhania@yahoo.fr